

The Giants Can Develop Hitters Too

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In 2012, only eight players 25 years old or younger came to bat 400 or more times and posted an OPS+ of 120 or better. These players may not be the best eight young hitters in the big leagues, but according to this reasonably good heuristic, they should be considered among the eight best. The names of four of these players should come as no surprise. Buster Posey, Mike Trout, Andrew McClutchen and Giancarlo Stanton, had OPS+ better than 150 last year and clearly are among the very best young hitters in the game.

The remaining four players, are not in the same class as hitters, but are nonetheless solid young hitters who will likely get better in coming years. This group includes Austin Jackson, Paul Goldschmidt and two San Francisco Giants, Pablo Sandoval and Brandon Belt. Thus, three of the eight players on this list are Giants. Sandoval and Belt are probably not on the short list of best young hitters in the game like some of the others, but the numbers make it clear that they are both very valuable offensive players and part of the reason for the Giants success last year.

Posey, Sandoval and Belt are, in addition to being 26 or younger, all products of the Giants farm system. In recent years the Giants have, for good reason, earned recognition for developing good young pitchers like Tim Lincecum, Matt Cain, Madison Bumgarner, Brian Wilson and Sergio Romo, while most fans, even most Giant fans, would view developing hitters as an organizational weakness. The data, however, suggests something different. In recent years, the Giants have been almost as good as at developing hitters and pitchers.

It is no surprise that a team that has won two of the last three World Series has a good farm system, but the discrepancy between how the system, and indeed the franchise, is perceived, and what it actually is remains significant. Posey and Sandoval are hardly unknown. The former was handily elected NL MVP and has ended both of his full seasons in the big leagues by catching the last strike of the World Series. He is one of the faces of the Giants and is poised to become one of the game's most visible and marketable stars. Sandoval, for his part, has a colorful nickname, and was the MVP of the World Series last year. Belt, however, despite an equally colorful nickname remains virtually unknown outside of San Francisco. While Posey is generally known as a star player, Sandoval is still at least as well-known for his weight as for his hitting while Belt is probably still seen as a disappointment to many fans because like many players who derive much of their value from drawing walks, he is under-appreciated.

Posey, Sandoval and Belt all have begun their careers in a pitcher's park, but also in an era that is transitioning to one dominated by pitching after a period of historically strong offense. Interestingly, Belt and Sandoval both hit better at home last year, while Posey was excellent both at home and on the road, but the context in which these players hit is nonetheless one that strongly favors pitchers and depresses offensive numbers. This has helped keep their numbers down, but has also contributed to the narrative that the Giants only develop pitchers.

The Giants have not had a trio of young hitters who came up through their minor league system who are this good in years. Longtime Giants fans may remember the late 1960s and early 1970s when the organization developed numerous good hitting outfielders and traded them away for the likes of Frank Duffy or Tom Bradley. Fortunately, it is unlikely a similar fate awaits this trio.

There are never any guarantees in baseball; and it is easy to see how things could go wrong with Posey, Sandoval and Belt. Posey could begin to confront limitations regarding how many games he can catch. Sandoval may continue to wrestle with weight and inconsistency and eventually lose on or both of those battles. Belt could damage his swing by trying to hit for more power or simply get bounced into and out of the starting lineup because of his absence of power and streakiness.

These scenarios are possible, but there is another potential outcome, that all three of these players will continue to progress and improve, even if only slightly over the next two to three seasons. This is all it will take for the Giants to have a trio of hitters to match what Bumgarner, Cain and Lincecum have done in recent years and to have a nucleus of talent that could keep them in contention for the rest of the decade.